

#### 1980: THE NEED FOR A WORLD LEVEL CONFERENCE OF MISSIONS

One of the key points in our discussion of the unfinished task is the crucial role of the mission agency whenever and wherever the churches want to lend their resources to the task of reaching the 84 percent of non-Christians who are culturally distant from any existing Christian group. It is not surprising therefore that there are many today who feel that a world-level conference of all known mission agencies would have many benefits. But since, as we have seen, mission agencies have by now in history--due to their very successes--become extensively converted over into church-helping organizations, it is well to think through more technically precisely what agencies should be invited.

The idea now being discussed arose specifically when it was proposed by the outgoing president of the (American) Association of Professors of Mission, Luther Copeland, at the June meeting in 1972. The writer seconded Copeland's proposal in the following year in a brief paper. Meanwhile, two exceedingly important conferences had taken place in the intervening December (1972). At Bangkok the former International Missionary Council, now restructured as the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches, met with only 8 percent of its participants representing mission societies (Glasser, 1977). In Chicago a consultation on the theme "The Gospel and Frontier Peoples" drew together 97 people, all of them representing mission agencies ranging from the most conservative evangelical mission agencies to Roman Catholic missions. Then, the following year, at the time of the 1974 APM meeting, but unrelated to it, a completely ad hoc group of twenty-four hammered out the following "Call":

It is suggested that a World Missionary Conference be convened in 1980 to confront contemporary issues in Christian world missions. The conference should be constituted by persons committed to cross-cultural missions, broadly representative of the missionary agencies of the various Christian traditions on a world basis.

A detailed analysis of this was given by the author in the April issue of *Missiology* last year (Winter, 1976, "1980 and that Certain Elite"). In that article many more details are given as well as a brief historical analysis of the chain of events which spans the distance between the earlier World Missionary Conference in 1910 and the present. Building on that article, further discussion took place at slack moments in the 1976 meetings of the ASM and the APM.

These discussions indicated that, for one thing, that article failed to make clear that both interdenominational and denominational mission agencies would be eligible. A much larger matter of concern revolved around the question of whether agencies working exclusively among Christians would be invited. They had not been in 1910, and this was a bone of contention in 1910 as well. In view of 1) the massive numbers of non-Christians where there is relatively little focus of attention, and 2) the massively large attention being given today, as we have seen, to interchurch aid and the E-0 evangelism of nominal Christians, it does seem obvious that the

much larger task of reaching non-Christians--especially the 84 percent beyond the reach of national Christians--should certainly have top priority in both the agenda of the conference and in the make-up of the participants. It would no doubt be unwise to discourage the attendance of representatives of those mission agencies not presently involved primarily in reaching non-Christians, but in such a case it seems reasonable at least to require that such outreach be a substantial interest and/or a planned activity.

A second concern has been expressed in several quarters about the feasibility of a meeting on the world level bringing together as wide a spectrum as actually attended the Chicato consultation, that is, including Roman Catholics, for example. A great deal of light was shed on this matter when the executive committee of the Asia Missions Association discussed the 1980 proposal at Hong Kong in September of last year. We confronted the fact that the meeting at Wheaton College where THE CALL was drafted included some Roman Catholics, who also signed the call. After a long discussion about the matter of a creed that would affect who could or could not come, the following statement was formulated and approved along with the recommendation to all members of the Asia Missions Association that they seriously involve themselves in the deliberations that would lead up to such a meeting.

#### STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

We, the members of the organizing committee, shall not presume to write a creed or a confession that will adequately express the particular perspective of each participating mission agency. We are, furthermore, aware that some groups reject all creeds, holding the Bible itself to be the only adequate expression of their faith.

We do, however, believe it is well that we express our disapproval of certain contemporary trends away from missions Biblically understood. It is consequently the consensus of this committee that all participating groups must acknowledge and wholeheartedly distinguish themselves from the following positions:

- 1) The belief that Biblical missions can be conducted without utter confidence in the Bible as the sole and ultimate authority;
- 2) The belief that the experience of the adherents of any religion whatsoever, Christian or non-Christian, can be considered adequately and effectively salvific apart from a personal acknowledgment of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

Note that this is not the statement of the Asia Missions Association, nor even the statement of a 1980 organizing committee, since a sufficient number of missions have not yet stepped forward to form such a committee. This is simply a draft of a statement of purpose which after discussion seemed acceptable to the members of the AMA executive committee and to the writer as the sort of thing that could be recommended to a future organizing committee, grappling as that committee will be forced to, inevitably, with the twin perils of present mission thinking--the denial of Biblical authority and the tendency to universalism. At that same meeting in Hong Kong, it was also suggested that agencies to be invited would have to fulfill at least the following minimum requirements: 1) that they have a board of directors, 2) that their financial

records be available to the public, 3) that they supervise, not just support, missionaries, 4) that they have at least five missionaries laboring in another culture (not necessarily foreign country), or (if a smaller number) at least twelve combined years of supervised field experience.

A great many other discussions have taken place, too numerous to mention. One response to my article last year (Winter 1976) is a special pleasure to report, coming as it does from the most eminent living apologist, outside the Roman Catholic tradition, for the strategic role of the decentralized, voluntary mission society, Max Warren:

I have just read your article. Let me say at once that I am sure the holding of such a conference will be most timely. And its whole concept is right (Warren, 1976).

Warren goes on in his letter to underscore the need, 1) for the substantial presence of non-Western leaders able and willing to promote missions, not just Westerners, and 2) for cross-cultural missions within the Western world to be considered equally valid, both emphases being most acceptable.

More recently, the Liebenzell Mission of Germany, which had earlier offered its facilities for the world level 1980 conference, has now formulated a series of technical questions which need concrete answers before intelligent preparations can be made. There is not space here to go into these questions nor further details about such a conference since our purpose has been merely to illustrate one of the important steps which seems clearly to be necessary if the great unfinished task is going to be directly confronted by the all-important agency structures which represent the initiative in the vast, vital missionary enterprise at this moment in history. It is safe to say that such a conference cannot succeed unless the heads of a number of mission agencies move shortly to gather in the appropriate ad hoc fashion to make the essential plans. Many other world-level meetings are already planned for the year 1980, some representing church traditions (e.g., Salvation Army, Restoration Tradition, etc.), others representing other spheres, some in favor of a narrower meeting perhaps consciously rejecting the proposal being discussed here.

However, this proposal does not suggest that a broad meeting like 1910 is the only kind of meeting that is necessary, nor that regional meetings of purely mission agencies-- like the Chicago Consultation in 1972--are undesirable. But how can Asian and African mission leaders take their places alongside Western mission leaders except at a world-level conference?

It does not have to be a big conference. There are not a large number of mission agencies in the world. They will not all wish to attend. Leaders are always fewer than followers.

It does not have to be a costly or elaborate conference. The great value of a place like Bad Liebenzell in Germany (besides being the headquarters of



Europe's largest Protestant sending mission--one that stands squarely in the lineage of Hudson Taylor) is that it is virtually the global air-travel center of gravity. Such a site would allow the various "spheres" attending to "level" all travel costs if they wished so that those from the furthest distance would pay no more than those who come from nearby. Or many societies might be willing to "adopt" the travel costs of a delegate from an Asian mission society. The Liebenzell mission is expert with tents in case the conference should overflow their already spacious facilities, and there are likely no guests that would be less likely to complain about special arrangements than the representatives of mission societies. This can be a very economical conference.

The 1910 conference was organized in two years. Our superior communications ought to allow us to do as well in the two and one-half years that remain.

But the largest obstacle is in our own hearts. Somehow Christians around the world need urgently to regain the pioneer mentality of the early missionary movement. Our successes have clouded our eyes and diverted our energies to many other good things. The unfinished task is more nearly finished today than ever. In 1910 Asians not Christian out-numbered Asian Christians 75 to one. Today, only 21 to one. But the unfinished task is still unfinished.